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## WW-P school unions amend pacts, freeze pay

By **Times Staff Writer**

March 11, 2010, 8:13AM

By Erin Duffy and Meir Rinde STAFF WRITERS

WEST WINDSOR - In an extremely rare move, two unions representing teachers, administrators and other staff in the West Windsor-Plainsboro school district have agreed to amend their current contract and freeze wages over a three-month period starting next year.

As districts wait with trepidation for Gov. Chris Christie's budget address next week, when they'll learn how much, or how little, state aid they'll be receiving for the upcoming school year, officials in the West Windsor-Plainsboro (WW-P) school district said it made sense to do some preventative cost-cutting.

"The one thing we will not be able to predict is what the state does, but we felt it was advantageous to control what we could," said Debbie Baer, president of the WW-P Education Association, which represents 875 teachers and other employees.

Under the provisions of the amended contracts, a wage freeze

for members of the teacher's union will go into effect for the first six pay periods, or three months, of the 2010-2011 school year.

Under the most recent contract settlement reached in June 2008, members were to receive a 4.7 percent pay raise next year. Instead, the 4.7 percent raise won't begin until after the three-month wage freeze is up.

Professional conference benefits, compensation teachers receive for attending workshops outside the district, will also be cut, resulting in combined savings of more than \$1 million, officials said.

Though their current contract was due to expire in June 2011, the association negotiated to extend their contract to the 2011-2012 school year, and they are now slated to receive wage hikes of 3.38 percent in that year, which is a lower hike than the 4.9 percent raise they received during the 2008-2009 school year.

The WW-P Administrators Association, which represents 39 principals, directors and supervisors, will also relinquish their 2010-2011 raises for a three-month period and give up professional conference benefits, for a total savings of \$80,000.

Administrative raises of 3.8 percent for the 2010-2011 school year will be reduced to 2.9 percent for the following school year.

District spokeswoman Gerri Hutner said the contract revisions were not ordered by the school board or administrators, but reached in collaboration with the two unions.

"I think we are just in a very difficult economic climate and we need to look at everything we can to control the amount of money we ask taxpayers to spend while still keeping a great educational program," she said. "Everybody realized this was a way for everyone to share the pain."

While unions are typically loath to revisit contracts already settled, Baer said once the idea to reopen the contract and freeze wages had been discussed, it was overwhelmingly supported by members of the WW-P Education Association. 91 percent of

whom voted in favor of it.

"It's something that we feel good about here," she said.

The state's recent school aid cuts, and the likelihood that Gov. Christie will announce further reductions in his budget address next week, are spurring interest in union concessions statewide, said Mike Yapple, spokesman for the New Jersey School Boards Association.

"We've received a considerable number of calls from school districts about reopening contracts. You may see more and more of this occurring in the coming months," he said.

Yapple said union concessions like those in West Windsor-Plainsboro have been rare so far this year. One other district whose unions agreed to a temporary salary freeze is Upper Freehold Regional in Monmouth County, which expects to save about \$435,000 in 2010-2011, The Examiner newspaper reported last month.

The prospect of layoffs could motivate more teachers unions and other bargaining units to consider similar concessions, Yapple said.

"This is an extremely difficult year, financially speaking, and next year will be even worse, without a doubt," he said. "Not only are school boards looking to squeeze the most they can out of their limited tax dollars, even the unions have to take a serious look at how this is going to impact their members."

A similar proposal to freeze wages for a year in the neighboring East Windsor school district landed with a thud at a school board meeting Monday night.

School board President Alice Weisman said she sent a letter this week to the three unions representing district employees asking them to consider a proposal to freeze wages for the entirety of the 2010-2011 school year in light of rumors that municipalities would receive aid cuts of up to 15 percent.

For a district like East Windsor, where state aid makes up 25 percent of the budget, that would work out to a loss of nearly \$3

million, she said.

Freezing the wages of every district employee would save \$1.8 million, according to Weisman.

The proposal, she said, "has not been well-received."

"I got a hand-delivered letter from the president of the school board making that request and I sent her a hand-delivered letter back saying "no way,"" said Ellen Ogintz, president of the East Windsor Education Association.

The union settled a contract with the district in November that doled out 4 percent pay raises, contracts that Ogintz said she has no intention of revisiting.

"They did not tell us any of the cost-saving methods that were being taken. They did not propose anything else to us," she said, adding that it was unfair of the board to ask teachers to re-negotiate before even receiving state aid numbers or exploring other ways to pare down the budget, like eliminating some of the district's 11 supervisors.

"We want to work with the board, but we cannot work until we have the facts and it is very wrong to assume we will just turn over our very hard-fought raises without the facts," she said.

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Posted by **yuckster**

March 11, 2010, 8:29AM

Total %-wise, this isn't a big deal, BUT then it sort of is too.

.  
It's a recognition that a School Board and a teacher's union can negotiate as partners. WW-P schools are among the best and the quality of the parents, district and teachers makes it so . . .

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Posted by **cocopazzo**

March 11, 2010, 8:44AM

They didn't go far enough. The Unions should have made their concessions contingent upon a cutback (not a freeze) for all Administrators (who aren't covered by these union agreements) for all Administrators whose salaries exceed \$100,000. Their compensation packages now comprise a significant portion of school budgets, and the numbers of non-teaching administrators continues to grow, but too much of the emphasis has been on the teachers. The leadership should lead by example, and voluntarily reduce their own salaries FIRST, and at a figure better than 4.7%.

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